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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 002752

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 TRIO SAY THEY ARE A MOVEMENT  
WITHOUT A CAUSE

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason 1.4(d)

SUMMARY  
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11. (C/NF) During a downbeat but constructive August 22 dinner with Senate Foreign Relations Staffer Puneet Talwar, Ambassador Feltman, and poloff at the Ambassador's residence, March 14 politicians Boutros Harb (MP for Batroun, Maronite), Mosbah al-Ahdab (MP for Tripoli, Sunni), and Nassib Lahoud (former MP for the Metn, Maronite) said that PM Siniora needs to be emboldened to take action on securing Lebanon's ports, airports, and borders. They said the March 14 movement has grown complacent and is unable to find a common rallying point to launch an effective challenge to Hizballah-Syria-Iran. All three agreed that President Lahoud needs to be removed, but in order to do so they will need to capture Shi'a support. For that, they may need to make the political decision to direct a good deal of the incoming reconstruction cash through Nabih Berri's suspect Council for the South, something they know PM Siniora is reluctant to do (a position which Ahdab agrees with). Regarding USG involvement, they asked for further facilitation to gain Israeli flexibility on the Sheba'a Farms issue and a stepped-up effort to arm and fund the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). On the question of engaging Syria (raised by Talwar), Harb and Lahoud agree with the idea in principle as long as a price is exacted from Syria first and it doesn't hurt Lebanon. END SUMMARY.

TEHRANIZATION OR BAGHDADIZATION?  
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12. (C/NF) Looking glum, all three said that Lebanon is in an uncertain period, with the country polarized over the arms of Hizballah. Rather than taking a definitive stance that could split the country, the Government of Lebanon (GOL) prefers to keep the issue in a "gray area." Ahdab, by far the most pessimistic of the group, said that Lebanon faces a choice between "Tehranization or Baghdadization" - either allowing the Hizballah worldview to predominate or facing increased confessional tension. Ahdab said that even in the predominantly-Sunni northern city of Tripoli people are beginning to wonder whether the "Hizballah way" - imagine the optics of USD 12,000 handouts - is best.

13. (C/NF) They all agreed that right now the GOL is being "too careful" and is "afraid" of provoking a clash among Lebanese, particularly Sunna and Shi'a, and that this official complacency is allowing Hizballah to rebuild. The Shi'a, temporarily inflated by their "victory" over Israel, may feel that they no longer must abide by the rules of the multi-confessional society. "They will run the country," said Ahdab, with Harb and Lahoud nodding dolefully in agreement, "Decisions will be taken from Tehran." Harb added, "They should not be allowed to govern Lebanon by their rules."

#### LOOKING FOR A CAUSE

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14. (C/NF) The Ambassador asked why the March 14ers are not being more vocal about this issue. Ahdab, again striking a down note, said that the movement is not organized enough, and that this resembles the group's aimlessness and inactivity following its ascension to power in July 2005. "I will not be loud and speak up," said Ahdab, "when I have no information and do not know where we are going." Harb and Lahoud agreed, adding that they do not yet have a rallying point to get people out into the streets in the numbers that protested following the Hariri assassination. "We need an issue to take to the street." What is that issue, the Ambassador asked. The group said they still don't know, but suggested the UNSYG's one month report on UNSCR 1701 implementation might help galvanize a movement to disarm Hizballah, especially if there were movement on Sheba'a Farms. All three professed bewilderment that the USG seems unable to understand the importance, in their view, of the Sheba'a Farms issue to gaining the upper hand over Hizballah.

BEIRUT 00002752 002 OF 003

#### HELP THE GOL ASSERT ITSELF

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15. (C/NF) All agreed that the government, particularly PM Siniora, needs to be strengthened and encouraged to face down the Hizballah challenge to its central authority. The international community should help undermine Hizballah's pretexts for maintaining its autonomous militia. Progress on Sheba'a Farms would be one facilitator, especially if it were linked to the GOL's "Seven Points" plan and stipulated simultaneous integration/disarmament of Hizballah's militia. "Hizballah's weapons need to be the focal point for the solution of Sheba'a Farms," noted Harb, "Can we get Israeli flexibility on Sheba'a?"

16. (C/NF) Hizballah also pretends that only it can defend Lebanese territory; that the LAF and ISF are simply too feeble to handle the job. The LAF needs assistance, training, and equipment in order to overcome this impression. "Can we get more money for the LAF?" Harb inquired. The Ambassador commented that the USG had only just committed itself to a massive increase - from \$1.9 million last year to \$42 million this year - to the LAF, though this knowledge did not seem to sate the dinner guests, who said the LAF still needs much much more.

#### MONITORING POINTS OF ENTRY

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17. (C/NF) The Ambassador commented though that the GOL seems unwilling to take responsibility even when it is capable of taking the lead; for instance, by refusing to request international assistance for monitoring points of entry, claiming this to be an "infringement of sovereignty." The Ambassador stressed that, rather, this would be an assertion of Lebanon's sovereignty. Harb, Lahoud, and Ahdab agreed with the Ambassador that this would be a tangible step for the GOL to take, especially since monitoring is a requirement under UNSCR 1701. They feel the Lebanese could

accept the support if it were done quietly and packaged in a way to seem as though the outsiders were merely training - harmlessly and unintrusively - the Lebanese on the use of new equipment, such as scanners.

TO LOSE LAHOUD, NEED TO WIN SHI'A

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18. (C/NF) The Ambassador and Talwar asked the guests whether removing President Lahoud now would allow the GOL a freer hand to take actions - such as deploying more forces to the frontier - which might otherwise be viewed as provocative by Damascus and vetoed by Lahoud. They agreed it would be useful to be rid of Lahoud, but that they need Shi'a support to remove him. "We need to capture the Shi'a. We need Shi'a alternatives who are for the sovereignty of Lebanon." In the current Lebanese Shi'a constellation, unfortunately, there are only two choices: Hizballah or, a distant second, the corrupt and unpopular Amal party, led by Berri.

19. (C/NF) Harb acknowledged that "our allies" in the March 14 movement - such as Walid Joumblatt and Saad Hariri - are leaning towards wooing Berri through channelling reconstruction money through his Council for the South (renowned for its record of fraud, waste, and abuse following the civil war). "Berri can be had," said Harb archly, "If we ensure his political influence, hegemony over the Shi'a, and throw in some money." Ahdab protested at this approach, saying he agreed with PM Siniora's attempt to institute a new framework to make the reconstruction effort more transparent and accountable. Harb and Lahoud disagreed. "Come on, are we speaking morals, or are we speaking politics?" Harb reproved, "But, don't give money to Nabih without exacting a price." The "price" would be his support for President Lahoud's removal.

OK TO ENGAGE WITH SYRIA; BUT GET SOMETHING FOR LEBANON

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110. (C/NF) Talwar mentioned that there is discussion among some in Washington about re-engaging the Syrians. What do

BEIRUT 00002752 003 OF 003

you think of that, he asked. Ahdab seemed the least pleased with this, asking, "Then why didn't you do it two years ago? Why now? Now it looks like you're just accepting their rules." Harb and Lahoud were more positive, suggesting that the USG would first have to get something from Syria before agreeing to talk. On Lebanon, they urged that the Syrians should first agree to support the embargo on arms to non-state groups in Lebanon and to "play ball" on Sheba'a Farms by agreeing to border delineation. "If they pay the price, then why not talk?" asked Lahoud (Ahdab seemed to come round to this point of view as well). However, the group cautioned, if you do decide to talk to Syria, keep it away from the media, otherwise everyone will suspect a deal is being cut at Lebanon's expense.

111. (SBU) Mr. Talwar did not have the opportunity to clear this cable.  
FELTMAN